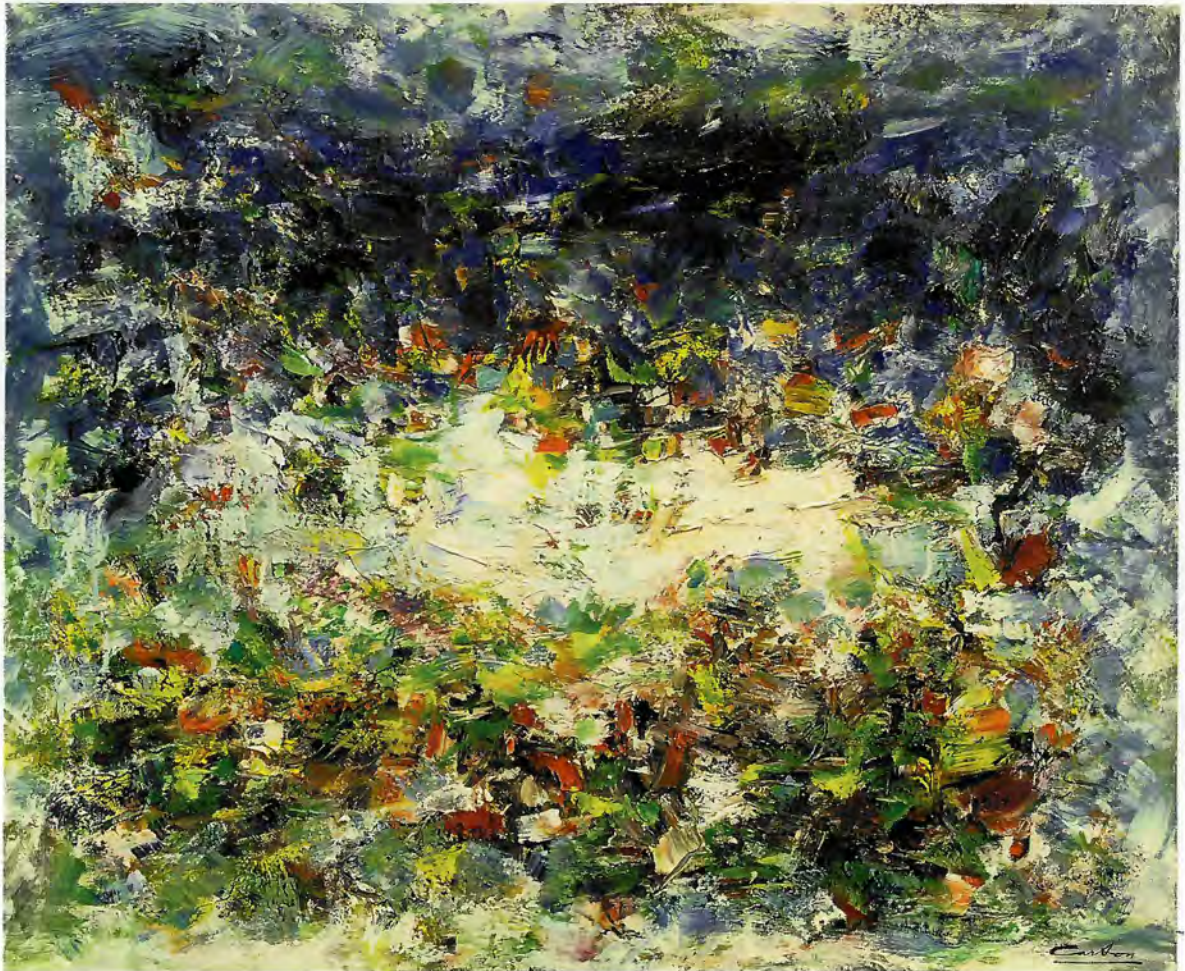


# paint as experience



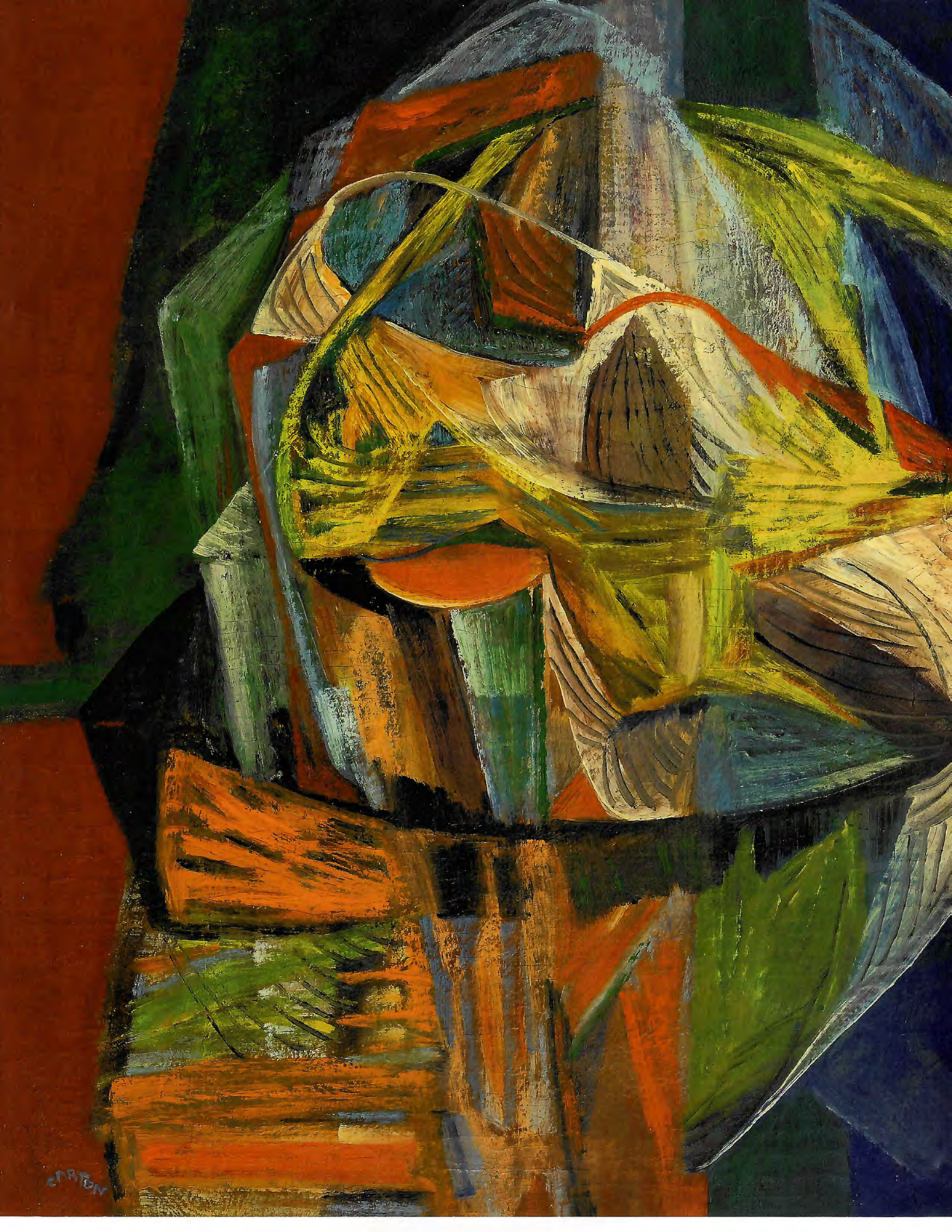
## Norman Carton: From Ukraine to Philadelphia to New York, bridging Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism

**At age 10, in 1918, Norman Carton and his mother were in hiding during pogroms unleashed** by the Russian revolution; six years later the same boy found himself safe and sound in Philadelphia, rescued from Eastern Europe by the intervention of his older brother, who had already relocated to the States. The pogroms in Ukraine during the Russian civil war resulted in the murder of up to 250,000 Jews. Carton had escaped with his family through Romania and immigrated to the U.S. in 1922.

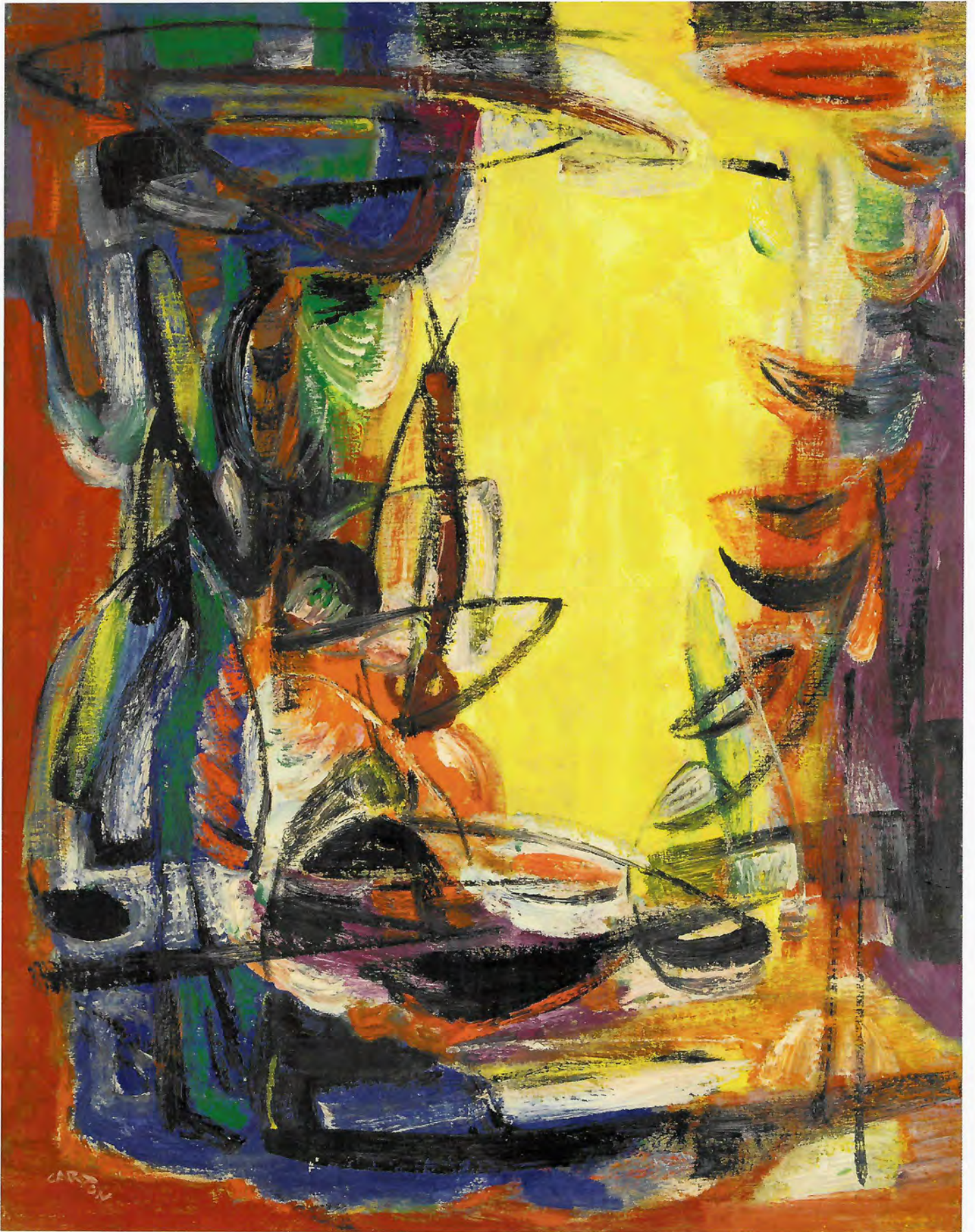
Carton began his art studies in Philadelphia in the late '20s, and it is hard to imagine the transformational power of art, and stability, on a young refugee who had experienced so much suffering. As a young art stu-

**By William Corwin**

Above: *Summer Meadow #758*, circa 1955, oil on canvas, 44 x 52 in. Opposite page: *Mummer #3129*, 1948, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.



ARTON



*Untitled #622, circa 1954, oil on canvas, 36 x 28 in.*

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Clockwise from left: *Ventnor #2284*, 1960, watercolor on paper, 21 1/2 x 16 1/2 in.; *Paris Summer #1125*, 1960, oil on canvas, 22 x 18 in.; *Night Ronde #2206*, 1960, gouache on paper, 24 x 19 in.

dent, Carton was introduced to the works of the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and Fauves. In later life, Carton's style would eventually come to rest in the Abstract Expressionist school, but what distinguishes him from his contemporaries is his passion for rich liberatory color. Color was an obsession for Carton, both in painting and photography, as well as the textile design company he founded. Carton has re-emerged with other overlooked painters from his generation, along with painters such as Michael (Corinne) West, and Janice Biala, and most of the biographical information in this article is greatly indebted to the research and writing of Jillian Russo.

Carton began studying with Henry Bainbridge McCarter (1864–1942) at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) in 1930. He received a fellowship to travel in Europe in 1934, where he became even more familiar with the legacies of Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, and perhaps most important to the development of his own personal style of painting, Soutine. In 1924, soon after Carton's arrival in the U.S., a serendipitous collaboration took place in Philadelphia. In addition to founding the Barnes Foundation, Dr. Albert C. Barnes invited the philosopher John Dewey to organize classes for students at the institution. As a philosopher of pragmatism, Dewey saw art as a means to instigate a visceral response in the viewer, as opposed to purely appreciating a finished work on a wall or a plinth (as expounded in his book *Art as Experience*). Dewey was also heavily invested theoretically in childhood education. Barnes wanted his institution to be a site of democratic interaction with contemporary art, such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Cubism, as well as indigenous works of art from Africa, so there was a meeting





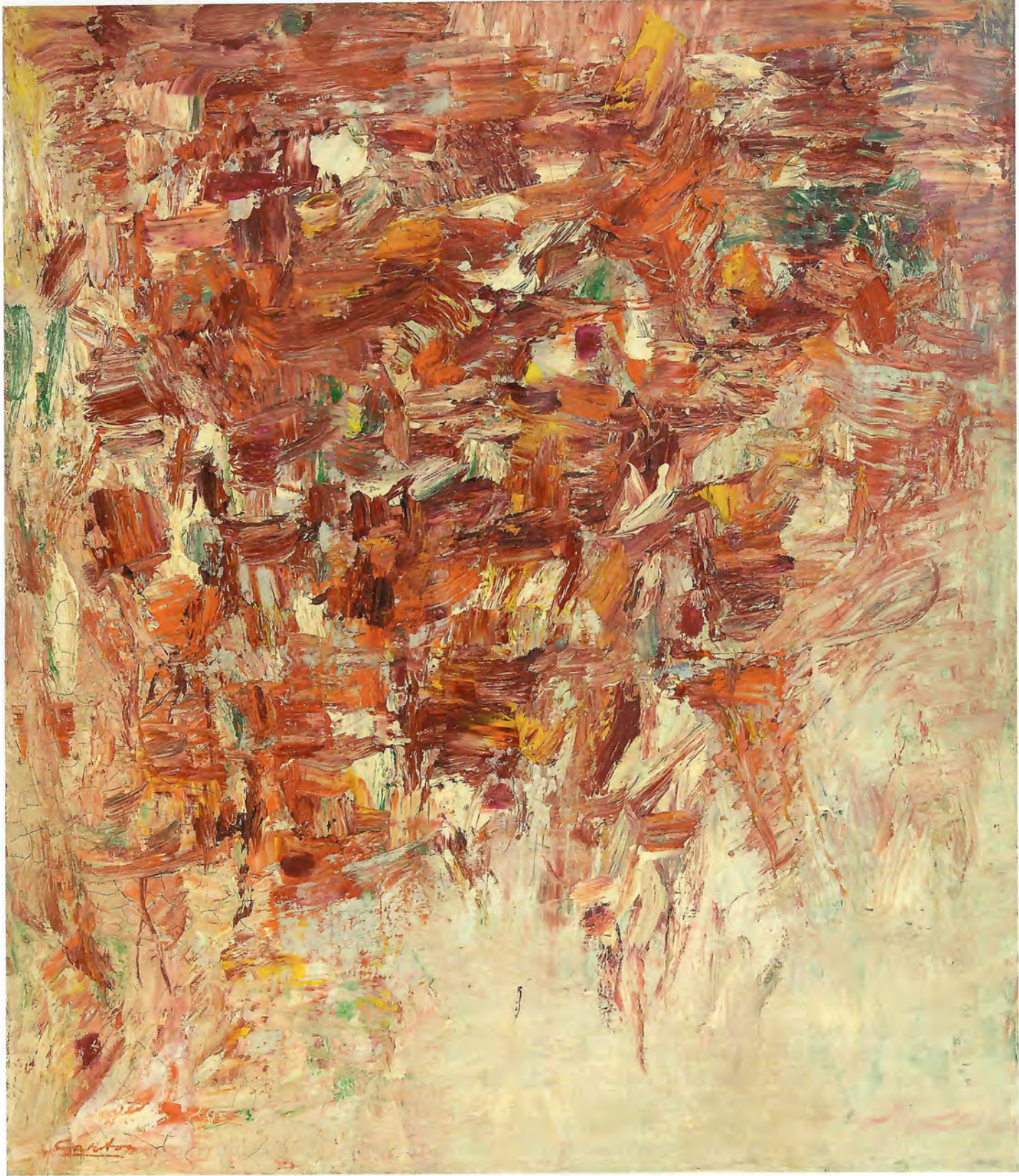
of the minds between the two men. Into this mix came the young Norman Carton.

In 1935 Carton studied with Arthur Beecher Carles (1882–1952) at the Barnes Foundation. Carles was an innovative painter (and father to the painter Mercedes Matter), but also one whose style meandered between a loose impressionistic realism and a more determined abstraction reveling in the lugubrious qualities of the paint. Carles exemplified the American painter reflecting the seemingly titanic events of the French art scene, and never broke from directly referencing Post-Impressionism and other European styles. Understandably, Carton also responded profoundly to French painting, and seemed in danger, as we see in works from the '30s and '40s, of remaining in the thrall of the Europeans. But, between Carles, Soutine, and the Abstract Expressionist movement brewing in New York in the 1940s, Carton rejected realism and figuration in his practice, though he would occasionally return to portraiture, most notably in his series of portraits of well-known women in 1975 for the United Nations' International Women's Year.

*Mummer* #3129 (1948) presages Carton's fully established painting style. The artist was no longer a youth when he painted it (he was 40!), and it shows the deft and confident application of paint of a mature hand. Unlike his later works, *Mummer* utilizes discernable and discreet plastic abstract forms which twist and

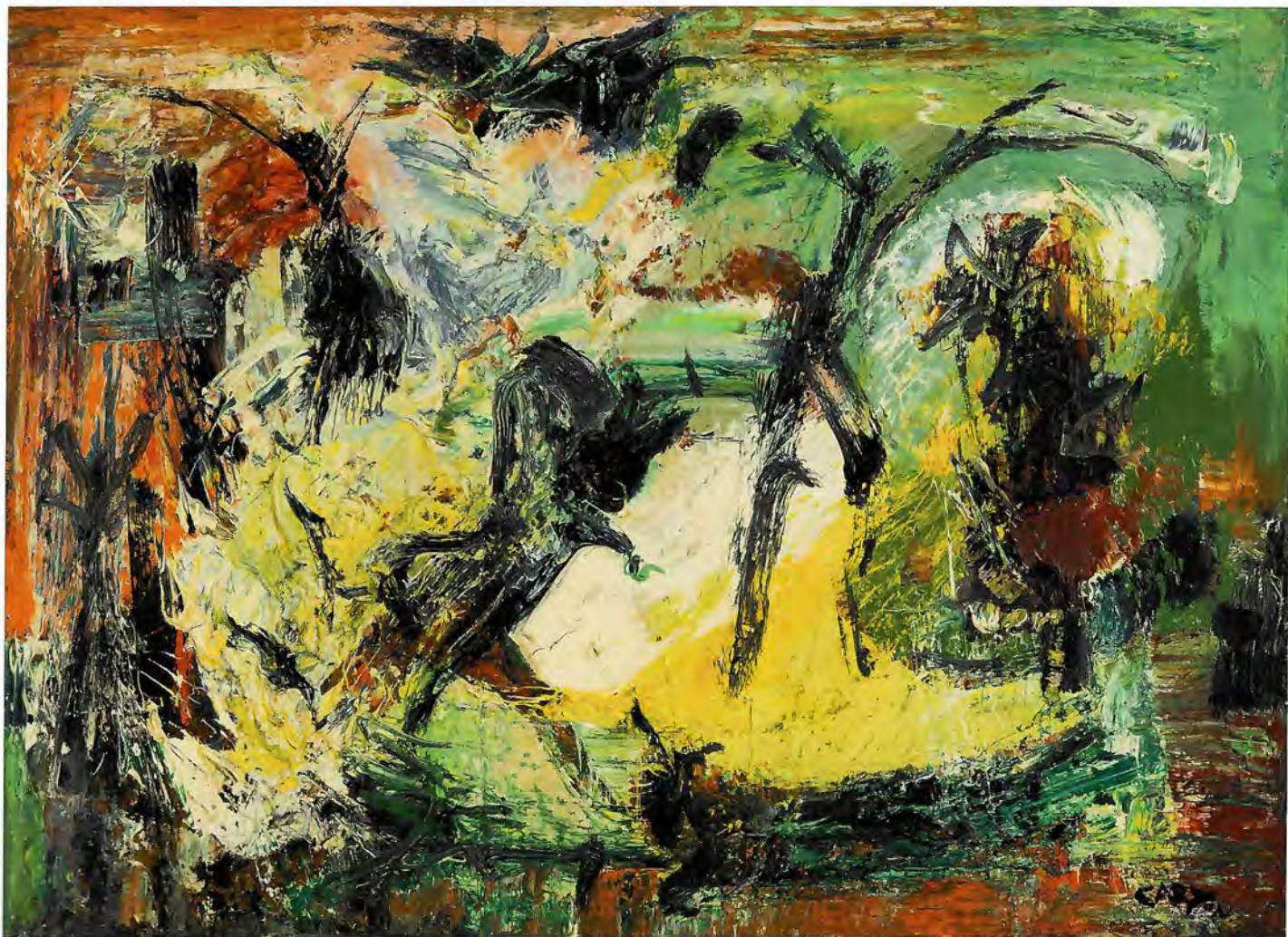
Clockwise from below: *High Noon* #665, circa 1954, oil on canvas, 30 x 52 in.; *Untitled* #667, circa 1954, oil on canvas, 58 ½ x 40 in.





*Untitled #719, circa 1955, oil on canvas, 28 x 24 in.*

**“Carton often paints with a brush laden with several pigments. Within each mark is an infinite number of shades or streaks. The effect is akin to a philosophical argument on canvas...”**



*Forest Green #668*, circa 1954, oil on canvas, 19 x 26 in.

stretch outwards from a central cruciform shape. The paint lies on the canvas with a ghostly transparent, shroudlike, and eerie quality, reminiscent of Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, painted four years earlier. The painting is strong, incorporating Cubism as well as Matisse, and a touch of Surrealism, and stands as a culmination of sorts of Carton's art experiences up to then.

Much like his life, the contrasts in Carton's paintings are dramatic: in a classic work such as *Summer Meadow #758* (circa 1955), the painter's basic units are clearly defined brushstrokes. The marks are independent; one might find a bright rose madder against a deep purple, against a grass green, very often inflected with white to create the effect of a blinding and twinkling surface. At other moments the marks work in tandem, like a school of fish: we can discern the singular gestures, but they are the same hue or tint, and thus the artist creates patches of shade or momentary stability, at least implying the notion of composition while still engaging with the AbEx theme of all-over painting. The individual brushstrokes themselves are analogs to the chaos of the total painting surface: Carton often paints with a brush laden with several pigments. Within each mark is an infinite number of shades or streaks. The effect is akin to a philosophical argument on canvas: the basic unit of application—the brushstroke, is the entirety

of the painting in miniature.

As French painting began to loosen its grip on the now middle-aged painter, his dramatic use of color becomes increasingly prominent, taking precedence over both form and composition. *Untitled #496* (circa 1953) oscillates between a desire for form contrasted with a clear fascination with blending one body of color into another. Blue melds into green, red into white, and criss-crossing the canvas, thick bands of black hedge in bodies of color, heightened with white streaks. Carton rejects naturalistic use of color in *Untitled #496* for a luminous diagram of sometimes uncomfortable chromatic comparisons and pairings. In *Untitled #622* from a year later (circa 1954), Carton continues to explore positioning color over form. Jillian Russo aptly compares the tilting hemispherical shapes and gestures to Gorki, and in their fan and rib-like articulations, they also have some of the morbid references to Bacon's or Soutine's sides of beef, but most noticeable in the piece is that form becomes a frame: at center is a riveting deluge of rich lemon yellow, seemingly pouring into the canvas directly from above. The writhing shapes that surround the citric light are in gloomy shadow, and again, very Bacon-like and the whole mass is off-set on a pure red background. Distinguishing the painted zone within the confines of the canvas, with a solid colored background would eventually become a signature gesture of the artist in the '60s.



*Untitled #496, circa 1953, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.*

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Above: *The Raven #756*, 1955, oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 45 ½ in.

Below: *Untitled #669*, circa 1954, oil on canvas, 38 ¼ x 49 in.

As an aside, in Carton's life and career, certain events and moments seemed to directly affect his aesthetic output. It goes without saying that the recurring theme of "how the light gets in" (Leonard Cohen), wherein a bright patch of light positioned against a dark background could be interpreted as a redemption of humanity in the face of the tragedy witnessed by Carton as a child in Ukraine. Carton's vacillation between figuration and pure abstraction also has a very personal narrative. In 1939, Carton, like many of his colleagues, became involved with the Works Progress Administration, a Roosevelt Administration program created to put Americans to work during the nightmarish unemployment of the Great Depression. Carton worked in the program until its dissolution in 1942, on several realistic murals, such as *Social Pioneering of American Women*, at a vocational school for girls in Philadelphia. In 1945, he began a textile design company with his then-wife June Groff, and perhaps even more than the Greenberg-ian demands of all-over painting, the need to design repetitive abstract fabric patterns may have influenced Carton in his de-centering of the object and form in his painting (he sold his shares in the fabric company and focused on painting in 1949). Transitioning between mural painting for the WPA and crafting textile

patterns, in his employment we see a direct progression from figuration into abstraction.

Despite the outlier compositional and formalistic questions raised by *Untitled #622*, many other paintings from that time





Left to right: *Night Song #2199*, 1960, tempera on paper, 25 x 19 in.;  
*Cascade #759*, circa 1955, oil on canvas, 74 x 54 in.

attest to the fact that Carton had found his stride stylistically. In *Untitled #667*, and *Untitled #693* (both circa 1954), the painter is exploring all the possibilities he can achieve through crowding alternating and opposed brushstrokes in myriad colors across the canvas. In *Untitled #667*, there is the implication of a horizon behind the strokes, between red sky and gray land, but in *Untitled #693*, a much darker painting, the marks fill every conceivable space, offering the viewer little respite. In 1953, Carton had moved permanently to New York, and in the late '50s began working and exhibiting at the Martha Jackson Gallery.

By the 1960s, Carton was firmly established in the New York scene. He taught at The New School for Social Research from 1962 until his death in 1980, and also opened the Dewey Gallery with Dorothy and Mel Tanner, Louis Schanker, and Yeffe Kimball, paying tribute to John Dewey's accessible and democratic art programs at the Barnes, from his youth. *Paris Summer #1125* (1960) shows the heavy influence of the New York School on Carton: a series of bombastic oversize strokes, some in solid green and peach, but the largest a mesmerizing radicchio pattern, land on a mostly off-white and swirling background of pure gooey painterly miasma. The effect is post-modern and also very de Kooning, who was obviously every-

where in New York at that moment. Transitive purely abstract color is everywhere in Carton's painting—he creates alternative ideas of complementary and dissonant pigments, playing with the happy accidents of his paint-loaded brush, and then modulating these chaotic zones by balancing the surface of the painting with darker or lighter areas.

Carton's work became increasingly literal in his focus on the stroke, and his pieces in the mid and late '60s consist of sharply defined, almost didactic presentations of marks, aligning himself with the obsession with literal paint that was also the hallmark of painters like Lynda Benglis, Arman, and David Reed, and eventually Gerhard Richter, Glenn Brown and Richard Patterson.

Returning to 1955 though, to Carton's painting *Cascade #759*, all the ingredients seem to be present in perfect quantity and proportion to consider this era of his career the most significant. Soaking up the painterly innovations of Soutine but rejecting anything close to image, *Cascade* is pure yellow light emerging through a deep blue background, the light itself transforming the surrounding brushstrokes from dark to a streaky gray and white—all transformation takes place through the paint itself.

While transformed from an immigrant Ukrainian Jewish illustrator in Philadelphia into a worldly New York Abstract Expressionist, Carton always seemed to have his heart in France, or in the Barnes, with the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. ▣